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MMXXIV

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THE FEEL-GOOD FACTOR

As wellness spaces take on increasing prominence at hotels and resorts across the globe, we speak to the world's leading architects and designers about their philosophies and approaches. By Fiona McCarthy

It seems the further we move away from being near nature in our daily lives, the more frenetic and stressed we become. So it is no surprise that today's approach to wellness architecture, from spa design to residential developments, emphasises the wonders of Mother Nature in some way.

"Environmental stimuli play a huge role in the development and function of the human brain," writes stalwart design journalist Emma O'Kelly in her new tome *Sauna: The Power of Deep Heat* (Welbeck, 2023). "Even walking down a noisy, congested street is enough to trigger the fight-or-flight response and cause cortisol levels to rise," she furthers. "Conversely, the sound of a water fountain, the smell of a rose in a front garden, the sensation of having a sauna in the forest can activate the parasympathetic nervous system, the rest-and-digest mode, which creates feelings of calm and relaxation."

Wellness spaces, from results-driven health resorts to hotel day spas, have become more than just a fashionable afterthought in today's increasingly sophisticated world of urban hotels and countryside retreats. At the recently opened Estelle Manor in the UK's Cotswolds, the forthcoming Roman-inspired 3,000sq m Eynsham Baths spa – complete with tepidarium bathing hall, five pools, treatment rooms

and thermal cabins – will undoubtedly become the estate's star attraction.

"Wellness architecture revolves around the essence of emotions – the feeling of stillness that comes when a space makes you feel immediately like you are being cocooned within an intimate world of comfort," says interior architect and designer André Fu, renowned for hotels such as The Upper House in Hong Kong, Villa La Coste in Aix-en-Provence as well as being one of the leading designers with whom the Maybourne Hotel Group regularly collaborates. This includes the new spa at Claridge's, where "the ritual of creating a 'journey' was carefully considered," says Fu. "How we guide the guests through a series of sculptural spaces that undulate in proportion was important to creating a visual journey conceived to provoke an emotional connection between the guest and physical space," Fu adds.

This idea of creating spaces that influence feelings and arouse emotions is "one of the most ambitious goals of architecture and interior design," agrees Lukas Rungger, co-founder of the interdisciplinary architectural and design practice NOA (Network of Architecture) with offices in Milan, Turin, Bolzano and Berlin. For the project Hub of Huts in South Tyrol, the NOA team spent time exploring the human body's

ability to relax, whether standing, sitting, swimming, floating or diving, before interpreting these positions into an interplay of perspectives that inspired the design of a group of inverted and upturned microstructures with gabled roofs, like an upside-down village, featuring three swimming pools and two saunas, which was then cantilevered out from the side of a mountain.

“The aim was to create an immersive space that led guests into their own dimension of wellbeing, allowing them to experience physical as well as haptic horizons in a new way,” enthuses Rungger. “A particularly interesting area for us is always the ‘threshold’ where inside and outside meet,” Rungger furthers. For another project, at the south Tyrolean spa resort Apfelhotel Torgglerhof, they played with vertical greenery, including climbing jasmine, to take this idea one step further “by adding two special sensory components to this threshold: scent and shade,” he adds. This “blurring of boundaries” – through the choice of materials, the play of light, colours and shapes – has fast become one of NOA’s key design principles.

For SHA Wellness Clinic’s new Mexican outpost, its location – immersed in a warm climate for most of the year, surrounded by nature with easy access to the sea – allows guests to disconnect from the noise of the wider world and reconnect with themselves. Enveloped in seven hectares of indigenous flora and foliage, just a stone’s throw from the Caribbean’s glittering turquoise waters, Mexican architect Alejandro Escudero has drawn on nature’s inimitable power to help balance the dichotomies of a space that needs to deliver both medical innovation and intervention alongside natural therapies and healthy nutrition.

“There is the holistic part of wellness that demands a more natural approach to the environment where you eat, sleep, exercise and meditate; but on the other side, as treatments and therapies are increasingly technology-driven, clients expect those spaces to have some sort of futuristic feel to them,” Escudero suggests. His trick is to use the same materials in clever, subtle ways so there remains a consistency of texture but each world retains its own sense of individuality. “Perhaps in the technology-oriented spaces there is less wood and stone than in the holistic areas – a desk, for example, where tests are taken, might feel cleaner and simpler with a white marble top, or just the mirrors are wooden framed – whereas a massage treatment room might feel warmer

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– designer André Fu

with the use of seagrass walls and rustic wood stools. But, ultimately, it is still the same wood and the same stone echoed throughout.”

Topography plays a key role for Reda Amalou and Stéphanie Ledoux, founders of Parisian architectural and interior design practice AW², in their approach to wellness design. “Our studio’s work articulates a site’s richest characteristics, from geography to local craftsmanship, culture and materials,” Amalou says of their work for projects such as the Silversands beach resort in Grenada to the recently opened Six Senses Crans-Montana in the Swiss Alps. They regularly draw inspiration from great masters such as Sri Lankan architect Geoffrey Bawa – godfather of “inside out” tropical modernism – and Italian architect Carlo Scarpa for his sense of proportion, materiality and detailing, say Amalou and Ledoux.

Silversands, for instance, was an opportunity to “design something clean-lined and contemporary yet anchored entirely in its surroundings,” says Amalou. “Architecture doesn’t stop with the buildings – we care just as much about the impression and perspective someone walking past might experience.” So while the hotel itself isn’t strictly a spa destination, it has the same holistic sense of escape, where one’s heart rate and stress levels immediately drop thanks to the calming way the hotel merges into the landscape, immersed in the abundant palm trees and vibrant Grenadian flora, and the use of wooden slats

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— designer Jo Littlefair

everywhere ensures the Caribbean breezes can gently blow through without interrupting the views of the turquoise Grand Anse Bay.

Meanwhile, at the Banyan Tree AlUla in Saudi Arabia, Amalou and Ledoux designed the tented resort to blend with the natural scenery of the surrounding Ashar Valley. Pedestrian trails wind through the sand dunes, helping to preserve the natural habitat, while sand-coloured canvas, terracotta render and the horizontal striations of compacted sand in varying earthy hues used for the spa's façade all harmonise with the looming rock formations framing the resort. "We want the guests to be at the centre of our designs," they say. At Crans-Montana, they designed the spa's treatment rooms as mountain cabins in the woods, organised around an Alpine Garden. "A strong identity with a sense of place or belonging makes these experiences unique," the design duo say.

As for Hong Kong-based Fu, "I conceptualise each spa project with the notion of a journey in mind, where a sense of discovery and feeling of escape is key." For the recently opened Maybourne Riviera, perched on the cliff top high above Roquebrune-Cap-Martin in the South of France, "I wanted to connect the guests to the expanse of the ocean and for them to emotionally interact with the sky beyond," he says. At Claridge's, "I wanted the spa to juxtapose the hotel's Art Deco heritage with the authenticity of a Kyoto-inspired experience." His spaces are always conceived to enhance "the wellbeing of the soul," he says, opting for authentic materials that are "solid and honest – from tactile limestone and solid oak to soft glowing lanterns."

Of course, a wellbeing retreat isn't only about heart monitors, intravenous drips and macrobiotic diets. It can be all this but fun, too. At Lily of the Valley, a year-round wellness retreat overlooking the wild, sandy beaches of Plage de Gigaro near Saint-Tropez, the spaces have been designed by French designer Philippe Starck to "feel as if they have always been there," he says of utilising the warmth of rustic materials such as grainy woods, rope, pitted plaster, weathered stone and worn leathers which echo the panoramic views of the Cap Lardier estate to the sea.

Its guests can "achieve the results they hoped for while still eating delicious food and going sea wading in a wetsuit – even in February – under the warm sunshine of the Mediterranean," says co-founder Lucie Weill. The key is that nothing should feel punishing. Guests can indulge in very different experiences – one can opt for spa treatments and the delicious weight-loss menu conceived by nutritionist Jacques Fricker and chef Vincent Maillard (with perhaps the odd sneaky glass of rosé on the side) while another can go for a 160km bike ride before returning to enjoy a generous portion of steak frites and a bottle of bold red.

"How we relax and counterbalance mental with physical health needs to be approachable," says Jo Littlefair, one half of husband-and-wife duo Goddard Littlefair, based in London, whose projects take them from Vienna and Warsaw to Denmark and Montenegro. "For us, the sociology of how spaces work and how they interact together is key. We're always thinking about how we can make people really unwind in a space,

and how we can make that journey interesting and captivating for people.”

Naturally, tactile materials are integral to this experience, Littlefair explains. Imbued in their designs for the new four-storey spa at Raffles London at The OWO is “a play on contrasts, from the mix of light and dark travertine, natural oaks, plasterwork ceilings, to warming copper and brass touches,” she says. “Textural details, from fluted oak and etched glass to curved ceiling coffers, ensure no surface feels flat or hard; relaxation booths are cocooned by fabric screens; and beautiful organic plaster reliefs of leafy branches trailing across treatment room ceilings provide an instant connection with nature. That connectivity really helps us holistically.”

This is why the ceiling-mounted tree sculpture suspended over a reflecting pond by local artist Daniela Monge of Entre Nudos at The Well’s Hacienda AltaGracia outpost (part of Auberge Resorts) in Costa Rica has been purposely set to connect guests to *Pachamama* (Andean for Mother Nature) immediately on arrival; and the reason behind Escudero’s passion for sourcing local ceramics and textiles that lend a touch of “imperfection and a sense of the human hand,” says the designer whose work traverses the restoration of centuries-old *palacios* in Madrid to luxurious beachside resorts in Tenerife. “It brings whatever a guest or resident is touching and seeing down to a more human scale.” These materials grow better with age, making a space feel not only cossetting and comfortable, but also healthier. “The air that you breathe feels different,” he enthuses.

At Lanserhof’s latest award-winning outpost on Sylt, the soothing natural colour palette of beige, white and grey, across wooden floors to thatched roofs (in fact, the largest thatched roof in Europe), blends seamlessly with the small North Frisian island’s stark, undulating landscape of windswept sand dunes, vast mudflats and Wadden Sea views to soften the serious business of assessing and improving a guest’s health. While weeklong retreats include extensive medical testing, from blood pressure, lactate and metabolic checks to sonographic colonoscopies, echocardiographs and spirometries, alongside natural remedies such as detoxing, acupuncture, massage and movement, the space itself feels far from clinical, its interplay of interior

and exterior humanising the relationship between man, medicine and nature.

Heckfield Place’s new 1,600sq m spa, The Bothy by Wildsmith, is hidden away behind an ancient walled garden. It has been fashioned from the estate’s former bothy shelter used by generations of gardeners, now enveloped in a haven of antique Hampshire bricks, fossilised limestone floors, and nearly 30,000 hand-laid tiles lining The Waters, a chlorine-free space of relaxation and healing that uses ionisation and natural-mineral ions of copper, silver, zinc, aluminium and gold. Floor-to-ceiling windows and a vast skylight draw in sweeping views of the sky and bucolic Hampshire countryside, complementing its therapeutic emphasis on recalibrating and reconnecting with nature through activities such as forest bathing in the surrounding woods, cold-water immersion in the Lower Lake, reiki and reflexology, and the simple act of picking vegetables from the kitchen garden.

The very best wellness design reflects the understanding that “you’re not just treating someone clinically but it’s also about how they feel in a space,” says Littlefair. “We are so multifaceted as human beings, it’s no longer a case of going down a purely scientific route and coming out with the same result.” For Fu, his ambition is to create spaces that “celebrate mindfulness”; for Amalou and Ledoux, “a wellness space should always promote the reconnection with our inner selves.”

Distractions need to be minimised; time needs to slow. “It gives you the chance to narrow your energies into one space, to concentrate on what’s going on in your body, and to concentrate on yourself and yourself only,” asserts Escudero. As Emma Loewe writes in *Return To Nature: The New Science of How Natural Landscapes Restore Us* (HarperOne, 2022), “continuing reliance on tech is not great for us. We need to extend relaxing natural elements like light and shadow into the indoor world.” For Fu, “When a space is thoughtful enough to make a guest feel fully at ease and taken care of, that is the moment when they can begin to rejuvenate,” he emphasises. Luxurious materials, fancy pampering and high-tech bio wizardry are naturally par for the course but, ultimately, the best wellbeing design is always when a space “connects with the soul,” enthuses Fu ▀